SLAVERY AND LAW

IN THE

LIGHT OF CHRISTIANITY.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE CONGREGATION OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS OF NASHVILLE, TENN. ON SUNDAY EVENING, JUNE 22D, 1851.

BY

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Jesus answering said unto them—Render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and to God the things that are God's.—Mark 12: 17.

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THERE is truth in the trite remark, that the present is an age of inquiry and reform. There is a manifestation of genuine inquiry, and a manifestation of morbid curiosity, and a manifestation of chimerical disquietude.

These are all characteristics of our times and of our land. There is a true spirit which is searching for the truth, and a morbid curiosity which seeks to know, but which is aimless, and a visionary disquietude, which is striving to conform the world to its ideal. Between them, there is no doctrine, no law, no institution that escapes examination, either just or unjust, either profound or superficial. We cannot check this inquiry by our indifference, we cannot silence discussion by our frowns. All the great agitations of the time, have social, moral, and religious bearings, and we are compelled to bring them into the Christian light, and to consider them in the Christian Spirit—for they will be brought forward into a christian or an unchristian light, and they will be considered in a christian or an unchristian spirit.

The great social and moral changes of our land are styled Reforms. Christianity is indeed, a reforming religion. One of its chief injunctions is that relating to reformation. Reform and be converted—or as it is commonly read—repent and be converted.

We all enter the world as social beings, and under the influences of the existing social institutions, whether moral or immoral, religious or irreligious; we pass from the helplessness of infancy to the vigor of manhood.

All institutions in the church or in the state, partake of earthly imperfection. This earthly life is imperfect, man is imperfect, all things finite are imperfect. There is but one being of Infinite Perfection. In the absolute sense, there is nothing good but God. But as it is true that the very or-

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ganization of man's being contemplates development; as the very condition of existence is progress; so all institutions, religious as well as political, admit of improvement and contemplate progress. And improvement in religious and political institutions, no less than in the human being, must be made within *limits* and *under laws*.

But not to indulge in generalities—we Americans, live under institutions characterized by as many perfections, and as few defects, as any institutions of which the world's history affords us knowledge. Still, over a widely extended territory, there are sectional differences, and diverse local interests, and various social institutions.

These diverse interests and institutions, have been measurably reconciled and harmonized, as they only could be, by concessions and compromises, rights surrendered and rights reserved—and in the natural course of free thought, and wisely directed action, we might have been—and to some extent have been—amicably adjusting differences, and identifying interests, accumulating comforts, and increasing human happiness. But no less in our country than in other countries, and perhaps no more in our country than in other countries, have, in later times, arisen classes of reformers, social, and moral, and religious reformers. This is well. But men differ now, as they always have differed, and always will differ.

There are reformers who observe and reflect, and there are those who thereorize and do not observe. We have in our land some of the truest laborers, and some of the wildest dreamers. The trouble appears to be, that so many overlook facts and examples, while pushing to extremes, their theories and principles.

In this condition of things, it is proper to inquire, whether or not christianity is silent. Has the religion of Jesus, to which we all nominally adhere, no voice to utter in this crisis? Happily, our religion is not silent. It has a voice to speak and a finger to direct, and its words and acts are now, as they are always, peaceful, loving and harmonious.

What effect soever, Jesus may have designed his principles to produce on the existing institutions, that he contemplated no instantaneous revolution, that he did not design the subversion, or even the sudden improvement, of the social arrangements that environed him, will not once be questioned. Though announcing the reign of a new worship, and the approach of a period when the sacrifice on Moriah must cease, and the very altar be thrown down, and not one stone of that majestic temple be left upon another—yet he so respects the Hebrew religion under which he was brought up from

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childhood, that he submits to Jewish rites, and observes Jewish festivals, and reads the Mosaic law, in the synagogues with his Jewish brethren.

Though he declared himself sent to establish a kingdom superior in character to any, and greater in extent than any preceding kingdom, yet he distinctly recognized the authority of the existing government and laws, and directed Peter where to obtain money to pay, both for himself and the disciple, the capitation-tax demanded by a pagan authority, and that too, the most tyrannical government on earth. Though a subject of Tiberias Cæsar; the head of a military government; he did not rebel against, nor in any way refuse to execute the law. Though in the highest sense a Teacher, and in the highest sense a Reformer, and in the truest sense a King, yet he did not command the emperor to abdicate the throne, lay down his sceptre, and stand at once on a platform of social equality.

He lived under a government that sanctioned a system of slavery, more absolute and objectionable than any existing in this land—Roman slavery, a system of the most abject and degrading bondage—yet, he did not command the master to relinquish his recognized legal claim of property in the servant, nor did he, except in his illustration of the virtue of humility, once refer to the institution in specific terms, as far as his teachings are reported to us. He rendered to Cæsar the things that were Cæsars, and to God the things that are God's.

He submitted to the existing government, complied with the requisitions of the law, and taught patient and unresisting submission, to his followers. Still, by the wicked distortion of his sayings, he was arrested, and tried, and condemned, and executed by Roman soldiers, as a traitor against the Roman government, and a blasphemer against Moses and the Temple.

Such was Jesus, as a Reformer. Thus, he exemplified the spirit of the religion which he established. Christianity is no mere abstraction, asking to be recognized; it is no mere theory, to be the subject of speculation; it is no mere organization, requiring submission to its rites and its decrees; it is no mere dogma, asking to be believed; it is no mere scheme, happily devised to suit an emergency. Christianity, as taught and exemplified by Jesus, is a living element, an acting influence, an operative power. It is a spirit, a universal spirit, seeking for, and overspreading, and coalescing with all spiritual truth, wheresoever it may be discovered, and whatsoever may be the outward and material combinations of error, in the midst of which that spiritual truth may have found its abode.

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The christian spirit, is a spirit of love, and labor, and forbearance, and perseverance. An incontestible proof of its divinity, is its capacity to live and to act efficiently, under all names, and all forms, under all governments and amidst all institutions. It may leave the names and forms of governments and institutions unchanged, yet it enters into them, and modifies their evils, and restrains their vices, and brings out their excellencies, and discovers their advantages. It may leave the relations of individuals to institutions, and the nominal relations of individuals to each other, unaffected, whilst it enters into the bosoms of societies and individuals, and while it endures all things incapable of instant improvement, it hopes all things, and labors long and patiently, to expel all that is evil, and preserve all that is good. Instead of revolutionizing, eradicating and destroying external institutions and social arrangements, it leaves them standing, in their names, and forms, and external peculiarities; but enters into them, and strives to neutralize whatever is corrupt, and invigorate whatever is healthy, and educe whatever is excellent. The christian spirit of active benevolence, and patient endurance, and devout reverence, may be appropriated and exercised by the slave as well as by the master, and by the master no less than by the slave: and without this reign of christianity within, no change in the outward condition, no abolition of the nominal relation of master and slave, can be of any inherent value. The act changing the outward relation of the parties, may leave the characters unimproved, perhaps, unaffected, perhaps deteriorated.

There was never a period, when the spirit of innovation was more rampant, there was never a period when the universal application of the benign principles of Jesus, was more loudly demanded, than at present.

Genuine progress has always been slow and gradual, but the tendency of the age, appears to be toward revolution, rather than reform.

The rapidity of external, material progress, has become contagious, and misnamed reformers, seem to expect to accomplish the most gigantic moral enterprizes with a telegraphic velocity. Most of the theorizers and enthusiasts of our Northern States, are men who know little or nothing of slavery and slaveholders, beyond what they have learned from excited, and caressed, and tempted fugitives, or from a hasty, superficial, accidental and prejudiced observation.—From distorted facts, and gross misrepresentations, and sometimes malicious caricatures, they have come to regard southern slaveholders as unprincipled men, who obstinately support what they themselves believe to be a wicked and cruel

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system. They have learned to regard slaveholders, as men having no incentive but avarice, and no feeling but selfishness; and then, with a strange inconsistency, they seem to expect to change what they believe to be the motives and feelings and actions of southern masters, by reckless exaggeration, and aggravating reproach, and unmanly threatenings. That cannot be the christian spirit of reform, of which violence and passion, are the most prominent characteristics. These self-styled Reformers (and I charge no insincerity) when they suddenly awake to the world's great wickedness, and discover how far it falls short of their ideal, and resolve that it shall at once be regenerated—when they thus expect, as if by the manipulations of a mesmerist, to throw the world into a sudden slumber, and in an instant awake it to a new existence, freed from every bondage, washed from every crime, and redeemed from every infirmity—do they not forget, that it is more than eighteen hundred years since Jesus of Nazareth first planted his religion in Judea, and that even now, with all the aid that human science has contributed toward its growth, not one third the population of the globe has ever been seated beneath the shade of the gospel tree. Perhaps the wisdom of modern Reformers would suggest it as an oversight in the Messiah, that he failed to seize upon the enthusiasm of the multitude, who shouted hosannas at his entry into Jerusalem. An enthusiasm by which he might at once have abolished the Jewish worship, and torn down the temple—and abolished the Roman worship, and torn down the pantheon—and on the ruins, erected new temples, with a new worship, by which the world might at once, have been terrified and dazzled—and subdued and fascinated.—They would regard it as a mistake on his part, that he left truth to a tardy progress through the ages, amidst numerous antagonistic influences.

However, it is a fact indisputable, that slavery, in one form or another, is one among the political and social institutions, amidst which christianity has always lived, and spread, and operated, and benefitted all within the sphere of its influence. Slavery as an institution, has existed in one aspect or another, as far back as authentic history will bear us, whether under Christianity, Judaism or Paganism; and it would seem to be the most irrational dream of enthusiasts, to imagine that the temporary excitement of a political faction, or the transient zeal of a religious sect, or a single act of legislation, can suddenly eradicate, or even materially modify, an institution which has co-existed with christian philosophy and christian philanthropy, for more than eighteen centuries.—As to the relations, social and political, of the two races in

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our own land—to speak for myself—I express my most deliberate opinion, that without a change in the physical and mental structure of one race or the other, or both, a change the occurrence of which is not within the range of probability, a change so great as to be equivalent to an act of creation by the almighty power—the two races never can exist at the same time, under the same institutions, on terms of social and political equality. That the same sentiment prevails, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, through our whole land, the actual condition of the African race throughout the northern states, is to me sufficient evidence. And of this, a still farther proof is now afforded, in the fact that nearly every northern State either has adopted, or is contemplating the adoption, of provisions against the admission of either naturally free or emancipated blacks, to political privileges, and in some instances, even against their admission into the State as residents, or at least regulations which virtually exclude them. Such are some of the singular exhibitions of sympathy for the African race, among our non-slaveholding brethren of the North.

In view of facts like these, is it not lamentable that "agitation! perpetual agitation!!" should continue to be the watch-word of reformers, who have but little knowledge, or no correct knowledge, of the institution against which they continue to excite public opinion; thus blinding their own eyes to the severity of their own legislation against the race whose welfare they profess to seek, fomenting sectional jealousies, awakening bitterness of spirit between individuals, and in no perceptible manner, benefitting either the free black or the slave?

I might refer to police reports, and to reports of prisons, and asylums, and sewing-women's societies, and reports of ministers-at-large in northern cities, testifying to the existence there, of heartlessness, and oppression, and pride, and selfishness, in one class, and of ignorance, vice, crime and degradation, in another, for which no parallel can be found throughout the slaveholding States, in the worst aspect of African servitude. But this it might be said, would be nothing to the purpose, though it might evince an inclination to the proneness of mankind, so forcibly illustrated by our northern reformers, to search for and discover evils that are remote, whilst blind to the greater evils, immediately under their powers of observation. One fact, I do not hesitate to assert, as justified by a tolerably extensive observation, that there is exercised a greater mutual confidence and kindness, between the white and black races in the slave states, than between the same races in the states that are called free.

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In our day there will be agitation concerning all institutions, on all subjects, and agitation is always needed. But it is the judicious agitation which is essential to healthy growth, which is essential to life itself, and not that fever of excitement, that whirl of agitation which disorders thought, disturbs good feeling, and unfits for sober action. Feverish agitation is often mistaken for a love of truth, and change is often mistaken for reform, and factious legislation is often mistaken for progress. It is much to be deplored that the discussions relative to slavery, should have been so injudicious as to increase the divisions between the various organized bodies called churches, awakening enmity, strife, and even litigation, among communities bearing the common denomination of christians, and professing allegiance to the common principles of love, forbearance and peace.

Reformers of the North, should remember, that all conscience is not on one side of the line dividing the slaveholding from the non-slaveholding states. An universal conscience against slavery, might warrant bold censure. But while we all know, that there is not now, even in the north, nor in a single state, a universal conscience against slavery, the whole history of the world exhibits, if not an universal conscience, at least a large balance of conscience in its support. At all events, our fellow-citizens of the non-slaveholding states may be persuaded, that there is among southern men, *a conscience* on this momentous question—a conscience too, as sincere, as calm, as deep, and as resolved, as any conscience that northern men can have. Together with morbid conscience, and a mistaken view of the actual condition of the slave, the violence of anti-slavery agitators (and it is but just to say that I think they form but an inconsiderable portion of the northern people) appears to originate, in their misconception of the mode of applying christianity, as a reforming element, to social institutions. They seem to regard christianity, as only an element outwardly operating on, and changing the external forms and names of institutions; instead of a principle or influence within the individual heart, thence operating outwardly, on church, government, and all institutions, diffusing its spirit over and through all, literally overcoming evil with good. A principle of devotion towards God, and benevolence towards man, which should direct and control the action of the individual in every external condition, and under every domestic arrangement —alike applicable to the citizen and the President, the master and the servant. Not a kingdom coming here, or there, with observation, but as Jesus declares a "kingdom of God within." A sustaining, ruling, peaceful principle, rising

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above and overlooking all external conditions, forms, names and distinctions. As Paul clearly expresses it—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

If such be the spirit of christianity, should it not, is there not reason to hope, that it may become the spirit of the communities or societies called churches? Discussion cannot be wholly silenced; agitation cannot be entirely suppressed.—But why, in the name of that christian charity which endureth all things and hopeth all things, may there not be among our fellow-citizens of the North, that generous and magnanimous discussion, which shall bring order out of confusion and light out of darkness; which may discover to them that the slaveholders of the south, no less than themselves, are professed christians, and reasonable men, having hearts to feel, and minds to understand, and consciences to decide, and prejudices, and opinions, and rights to be respected? Why may not northern churches, having creeds and disciplines, cease to incorporate articles and regulations, relative to a sectional and domestic institution with which they are not directly concerned—and if there be evils connected with slavery, leave us here, where the institution exists, to apply the correcting influences of christianity to all its evils, as we may find evils to appear?

No man in the South, more than in the North, I imagine, will assume that the institution of slavery any more than any other institution in the world, whether political, social or religious, is free from imperfections. While it will probably be assented to by all, that it might have been better for our race and for our land, had the African never been brought into contact with us—it will also be admitted that the only elevation in the African, from the darkest ignorance and grossest barbarism, has occurred, in the inscrutable allotments of providence, from the subjection of the African to our race. And the only gleam of civilization which has yet reached the dark land of his ancestors, has been borne thither from our shores, by the descendant of the bondsman, by the emancipated slave, who has gone to Liberia, and other parts of the African continent.

But whether it prove evil or good eventually, the slave institution has existed among us from the first settlement of our country; it has been established by the customs of our country; it has been recognized and sanctioned both directly and tacitly, by the religion of our country; it has been recognized and sanctioned by our civil authorities, and has become so interwoven with the very texture of our social organization, that many of the best and wisest minds, fear that rude-

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ly to separate them, would be to sever the social bonds; to rend the fabric of society into worthless shreds, and to bring down, Sampson-like, upon our own heads, the whole civil edifice, involving bond and free, master and slave, in one common, irretrievable ruin.

That zeal without knowledge, which by popular excitement, and party legislation, and resistance to national law, strives to effect the immediate nominal emancipation of three millions of blacks, as it seems to me, blindly jeopards the real liberty of twenty-millions of whites. For without the union of these states, I cannot believe, that either white or black, could long live and be free. He surely is a dreamer, who presumes that an imaginary line separating a northern from a southern Republic, would adjust difficulties or terminate dissension. The establishment of northern and southern governments, would neither harmonize clashing interests, nor extinguish sectional jealousies. The misguided sympathy of vociferous enthusiasts would increase on the one side, and the indignant remonstrances and admonitions of slaveholders would increase on the other. On the one side would increase aggressions; on the other would increase provisions for defence. One would continue to provoke; the other would certainly resent; continued irritations would eventuate in open contests, and terrible to all, would be the direful result. The dissolution of this union—would seem to me, like thrusting from us the only social and civil instrument of power to protect any earthly right, of either one race or the other.—It would be to shiver into fragments, the tocsin which for three score years has been ringing the deathknell of every throne in christendom; it would be to prove the experiment of self-government a failure, and to crush the last hope of suffering humanity, in the eastern hemisphere; it would be to take to ourselves superstition, ignorance, and barbarism, in exchange for christianity, civilization, and intelligence; it would be to take to ourselves anarchy, cruelty, and death, in exchange for peace, benevolence, and life.

Under a government like ours, where the laws that govern the people originate with the people, we all, all, North, South, East and West, should have faith in the justice of the people, to believe that every law that proves itself wise and just, will be nobly sustained, and every defect generously corrected by the people—and so, as citizens, and republicans, and christians, we should await patiently the true touchstone of time, the safe test of experience. An inconstant fluctuating legislation, is one of the evils to which our government is peculiarly exposed. Nothing indeed but loyal submission, and patient trial, and ultimately very general dissatisfaction,

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should warrant us, as a people, in seeking the repeal, or even modification, of a law which passes the national legislature, meets the Executive approval, and receives the sanction of the supreme judicial tribunal of the land. On the general stability of law, depends in a great degree the popular respect for law, and on popular respect for law, depends for the most part, our individual happiness, our social prosperity, and our national existence. If, superior to national law, *individual conscience*, shall be supreme arbiter, then the reign of social law is chimerical, and republican government, is a dream never to be realized. Complete anarchy, or absolute despotism, must be the world's destiny, and every nation of the earth may repeat the fearful tragedy of France, with multiplied horrors, and despair forever of earthly amelioration.

May the shades of the nation's heroes, in the spirit-world, be commissioned to check every suicidal hand, that may be raised to tear away the pillars of the sacred temple of our political union! May the shades of our nation's sages, be commissioned to inspire our whole people, with the love of justice, and the duty of a rational obedience! May the holy spirit of Jesus, melt the bitterness of party feeling into the sweetness of christian charity! And may the Almighty Father, who "from seeming evil still educes good," convert the apparent darkness of our present prospects, into a glorious day of peace, and joy, and ceaselessly extending happiness!

We are wanting in faith in the religion of Jesus, if we do not believe that the ultimate triumph of christian truth is inevitable—as sure as the progress of time. The benign and subduing influence of christian love, must prevail, in our land, and all lands. The truths and principles of christianity are to pervade, they do pervade, our whole civilization. And as they must develope what is good, and restrain what is evil, in the individual, though they should not essentially change his external social relations—so shall they live in, and tend to develope what is beneficent, and restrain what is injurious in church and state, in religious and social and political institutions, however forms and names may remain unchanged.

Fellow-citizens, and fellow-christians—It is encouraging to believe, and it is true—as all history proves, that the people, the great body of the people, in all lands, are conservative of social arrangements, and obedient to law, originating with the properly constituted authority. It is so in our land—and we now see what we have not seen before—the hitherto dormant energies of the whole northern people, are truly roused to the greatness of the occasion. There is a spirit abroad, of calm and reasonable inquiry. Men of all sects, all parties,

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all names, are rendering cordially, their opportune and effective support to the proper authority of the land, magnifying the law, and making it honorable. We see that they are uttering words and performing acts, which clearly evince a fixed determination to maintain the majesty of national law, and in the true spirit of christian philosophy, to protect the rights and respect the opinions, and even prejudices, of every citizen, North and South—leaving to time, and the all-powerful element of Christian love, to effect all moral changes, in institutions of every form and every name. In our land, as in the world, the prayer of Jesus will be heard. The prayer concerning his followers, "That they all may be one—I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one." A unity of benevolence to man, and a unity of devotion to the Creator, who

> "Lives through all life, extends through all extent,
> Spreads undivided, and operates unspent,
> To him, no high, no low, no great, no small
> He fills, he bounds, connects and equals all."

Let us trust in God, and have faith in the integrity of the Republic.

NOTE.

[The writer appends in the following note, the remarks made in the body of the Discourse at the time of its delivery, representing what he conceives to be the position of Unitarian Christians generally, relative to the Fugitive Law.]

It is gratifying to liberal Christians, or the religious body known as Unitarian Christians, to feel the entire liberty and yet entire security of their position, with respect to the domestic institutions and civil law of the land. This position I will embrace the occasion, in a few words to state. It will be obvious on a moment's reflection that the fervor of feeling on this exciting topic, especially in the non-slaveholding States, naturally results in wide differences of action as well as of opinion. Churches having rigid external organizations, and prescribed confessions or articles of faith, are morally certain to divide on this question alone—and that too under great excitement, often indulging in harshness of expression and bitterness of spirit, and where church property is concerned—they are likely to be involved in litigation.

This has actually occurred to some extent in the Methodist and Baptist, and I know not, but in other denominations. In all exclusive organizations, this can only be avoided in one of two ways, viz:—by entirely ignoring the whole subject—by a complete voluntary silence—which in the nature of the case seems impossible—or, by the necessity of submission to some supreme authority, which claims and exercises undisputed right to control action, utterance, thought and conscience, as in the Roman Catholic Church.

Unitarian Christians are happily free from such a dilemma. There is no supreme ecclesiastical authority exercising jurisdiction over the churches. Each congregation of worshippers, is an independent church, and where state laws require incorporation, a corporate body—owing no allegiance to any ecclesiastical organization in the world—but framing such regulations, and adopting such forms and ceremonies as it may deem expedient. And within each particular congregation or church, each man stands bound in honor as a gentleman, no less than in charity as a christian, not offensively to obtrude his peculiarities of doctrine either religiously, politically, or otherwise, upon those with whom he stands associated as a worshipper. Recognizing no written creed exclusive of the Scriptures, which are to be interpreted by each individual for himself, responsible only to God, and under God to human society and civil law—it is obvious that there can

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be no schism in the church on the question of slavery. There can be no Northern Unitarian Church and no Southern Unitarian Church, while in every Unitarian Church in non-slaveholding States, there may be the greatest diversity of opinion on the subject without in the least diminishing their intercourse and christian harmony.

Each worshipper in a church of Unitarian Christians is responsible to *God* only, for his motives and his doctrines—to *society*, for any impropriety, any outrage on or disregard of its usages—and to *his country*, for any violation of its laws. Seeing that in fact no real uniformity exists in churches requiring assent to written confessions and prescribed articles, Unitarian Christians offer no temptation to a nominal or apparent agreement, where there is not and cannot be, a real agreement of opinion. Still, there is among Unitarian Christians, I think, as a matter of fact, positively more actual agreement, not only as to the essentials of a Christian character, but also as to essential christian doctrines, than among the other bodies of Christians. Such is the actual result of earnest inquiry and reasonable freedom of thought and speech in religion, no less than in politics, philosophy, and science.

From this position of Unitarian Christians, all will perceive the impropriety of introducing to the consideration of a meeting like that, of clergymen and others, called the meeting of the American Unitarian Association—resolutions censuring particular individuals for their opinions expressed relative to the Fugitive Slave Law. The resolutions offered at the late meeting in Boston (and which have been so extensively circulated in newspapers,) naming Hon. Millard Fillmore, Hon. Daniel Webster, Hon. George Bancroft, Hon. Edward Everett, Rev. Dr. Dewey, Rev. Dr. Gannett and other eminent statesmen and clergymen holding the views of Unitarian Christians—were promptly and justly denied admission to the consideration of the meeting, as being offensively personal, and incompatible with the high position of Liberal Christians.

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